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Preface

The Old Town District contains a special combination of traditional warehouse and industrial buildings. They convey a sense of the historic character of the warehousing and commercial activities that have been a part of the transportation and wholesale of goods in Wichita for the past one hundred years. It is a particularly interesting part of downtown because it exhibits a sense of “living history,” one by which the area continues to tell a part of the story of Wichita.

Early photographs demonstrate that Old Town was a lively district. Its underlying framework came from the repetition of similar building elements among the various stores, warehouses and offices that housed the majority of business activity. For example, most buildings had loading docks for handling goods. Some had a single primary entrance that also led to offices above. A few had display windows for retail services. Virtually all of the buildings had brick fronts aligned at the street edge. Ornamentation was modest, but it was used frequently. It appeared in a variety of forms, from stamped metal cornices to inlaid brick patterns to carved wood and terra cotta details. While variations in scale and building period were reflected in the details of the individual building designs, an overall sense of visual continuity existed.

Horizontal moldings and window sills were generally aligned on building facades, which contributed to this sense of visual continuity. Where upper floors existed, the repeated rhythms of similarly-sized windows also enhanced the setting.

While there was a certain degree of unity to the district, the climate was one of informal design and dynamic commerce. Signs of varying sizes and materials changed frequently. In addition, portions of storefronts were often modified. The character, as conveyed in historic photographs is not one of a pristine, carefully controlled area, but rather one in which variations in design details were typical.

The designs for signs reveal a lot as well. Flush-mounted signs were painted onto brick or located on a panel flush with the wall. Many of these seemed to align at similar heights. Projecting signs were relatively modest in scale and few overwhelmed the scene. In general, signs were in balance with the street setting as a whole.

Fabric awnings appeared on many buildings. Horizontal and shed shape metal canopies appeared on others, especially over loading docks.

This informality, as conveyed in historic photographs, provides an important direction for conservation in the district. It suggests that a reasonable degree of flexibility in the use of design details is appropriate. The district was never fancy and it should not be so today. While the continuity of the district's overall character should be respected, it is also true that a certain degree of flexibility is appropriate in renovation work and that new, compatible designs for infill should be encouraged.

As a result, the design guidelines presented in this document seek to achieve a balance between preserving all of the surviving details of the district and permitting an “open season” on the design character of the area. The standards therefore focus on big picture issues. For new construction, they ask that a building align with others, use similar materials, and convey a similarity in form and material.